

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 369 212

EC 302 941

AUTHOR Wald, Penelope J.
TITLE The Family Involvement Triangle: A School-Home Collaborative Model. Project APIP.
INSTITUTION George Washington Univ., Washington, DC. Dept. of Teacher Preparation and Special Education.
SPONS AGENCY Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services (ED), Washington, DC.
PUB DATE Jul 91
CONTRACT H024A80002
NOTE 35p.
PUB TYPE Guides - Non-Classroom Use (055)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Cooperative Programs; *Disabilities; *Early Intervention; Educational Cooperation; *Family Involvement; Family School Relationship; Mainstreaming; Models; Parent Participation; *Parent School Relationship; Parent Teacher Cooperation; Preschool Education; Social Networks; Social Support Groups

ABSTRACT

The Family Involvement Triangle (FIT), developed by Project APIP (Alexandria Preschool Intervention Program), is a family-focused, family-directed, school-home partnership for integrated preschool intervention programs. The major goals of the FIT model are to promote parent participation in the schooling of their child, to support parents in accomplishing their goals for their preschool child, and to offer opportunities for parent-to-parent networking. The FIT model focuses on developing collaborations between staff and individual families, families within the context of the school community, and families as friends outside of school. The staff nurtures these collaborations through strategies that promote relationship building, establish collaborative goals, and support communication maintenance. FIT attends to the building of both formal and informal support systems that enable parents to experience a sense of competence and involvement in the education of their preschool child. This paper describes the theoretical foundation and practical application of the FIT model and discusses the mechanics of creating and maintaining relationships in the three FIT Collaborative dyads: family-school, school-network of school families, and network of school families-family. The discussion is illustrated with activities and projects. An appendix contains a guide for a focused parent interview. (Contains 25 references.) (JDD)

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THE FAMILY INVOLVEMENT TRIANGLE

A School-Home Collaborative Model



Project APIP

Penelope J. Wald, Ed.D.
Alexandria Preschool Intervention Program
The George Washington University

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THE FAMILY INVOLVEMENT TRIANGLE

A School-Home Collaborative Model

Developed by:
Penelope J. Wald, Project Director
Alexandria Preschool Intervention Program (APIP)
Department of Teacher Preparation
and Special Education
The George Washington University
Washington, D.C. 20052

July 1991

This work was developed under Grant No. H024A80002 with the Office of Special Education and Rehabilitation Services, U.S. Department of Education (OSERS/DED). The content, however, does not necessarily reflect the position or policy of OSERS/DED, and no official endorsement of these materials should be inferred.

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INTRODUCTION

In the life of a child, schooling brings together two institutions in our society: the school and the family. Educators in recent years have focused on ways to promote partnerships between the school and home (MacDowell 1989; Lueder 1989; Davis 1989; NASBE 1988). Partnership efforts have been especially prevalent in early childhood education and early intervention.

In early childhood education the involvement of parents as partners in the child's school is indicative of a quality program (Schweinhart 1988). Head Start, a national leader in the delivery of early childhood services provides extensive guidelines for parent involvement in the Head Start Program Performance Standards (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services 1984). These guidelines focus on enhancing communication between school and parents, promoting parenting skills, and establishing cooperative program planning. Another early childhood standard-bearer, the Accreditation Criteria and Procedures of the National Academy of Early Childhood Programs (Bredenkamp 1984), details goals and procedures for staff and parent interaction. The primary goal of this school-home partnership is to ensure "parents are well informed and welcome as observers and contributors to the program" (p. 15).

Early intervention over the past decade has come to "recognize the difficulty of developing programs for [young] children outside the context of the family" (Beckman and Bailey 1990, p. 195). The family has been described as a necessary participant if the effects of early intervention are to be sustained (Meisels 1985). The passage of Public Law 99-457 in 1986, with its provision for Individualized Family Service Plans (IFSP), has greatly influenced the shift from child-centered to family-centered early intervention for the infant and toddler population. A recent document supporting the implementation of this ideological shift, Guidelines and Recommended Practices for the Individualized Family Service Plan (Johnson, McGonigel, and Kaufmann 1989), sets forth principles and procedures for developing an IFSP that meet the needs of young children with disabilities and their families. The IFSP process emphasizes the role of the professional to respect, honor, and accept the wishes and autonomy of the family when designing intervention services.

The entrance of preschool-age children with disabilities into a school or center-based program for early intervention services often signals a decline in family-focused intervention efforts. Yet children at ages three, four, and five are still very tied to and influenced by their home and family. Since early intervention by definition encompasses young children from infancy to age eight, early childhood special educators are challenged to continue supporting both the children with disabilities and their families during the preschool years. The team delivering preschool intervention services is responsible for maintaining a family-centered,

family-responsive attitude in the planning and intervention process, thereby assisting both the child and the family in the successful transition to a school-based program (Brown 1991).

Alexandria Preschool Intervention Program (APIP), an integrated preschool demonstration model, is committed to developing a meaningful relationship between school and families. The development of a collaborative relationship between home and school is vital to the success of an integrated preschool model, where children with identified disabilities are educated alongside their normally developing peers. In an integrated environment, families can share the universal joys and frustrations associated with child rearing during the often taxing preschool years. The integrated setting allows families who have children identified with disabilities to be a part of the mainstream, thus increasing the possibility of networking with community-based support systems such as neighborhood friends, religious groups, or recreational programs. Conversely, families of typical children become more tolerant of individual differences when they meet daily with a diverse group of children and with teachers who respond eagerly to different abilities and learning styles. The preschool experience is normalized for everyone when staff invite and encourage all families, regardless of their risk status, to become partners with the school and with other families.

Project APIP's commitment to a strong school-home partnership arises from the following assumptions compiled by the APIP staff about the role of families and schools in the growth and development of young children:

Assumption 1. The family is the primary social system to which the child belongs. Parents are the mainstay of the child's support. Children experience a sense of importance and pride when their parents participate in their school life.

Assumption 2. The family is an interdependent system. Changes in one member of the family affect the entire system. The entrance of a child into school is an event that affects the family system.

Assumption 3. Through participation, families bring to the school setting their unique strengths, interests, hopes, and desires. Ongoing interaction with school enables families to communicate aspirations for their child as well as share their talents and unique qualities with others.

Assumption 4. School may expand the family's social network. The opportunity to develop new and varied relationships through participation in school activities increases the availability of professional and personal support options for the families.

To create an atmosphere in which all families feel valuable, respected, and connected, Project APIP developed the Family Involvement Triangle (FIT). FIT represents a family-focused, family-directed approach to family involvement. The APIP FIT model describes a system that encourages families to actively engage in the learning, growing process of their preschoolers in a manner that best "fits" them. The school staff creates with each family a customized plan for a school-home partnership that emphasizes three broad goals:

- actively involving parents and families in their child's schooling
- tailoring a plan to meet the specific needs of each family for their preschool child
- providing opportunities for parent-to-parent networking

This paper describes the theoretical foundation and practical application of the APIP Family Involvement Triangle: A School-Home Collaborative Model. The first section describes who collaborates in FIT, the second section discusses how collaboration occurs, and the remaining three sections detail the intent and mechanics of the specific collaborations.

WHO COLLABORATES

In the Family Involvement Triangle, three constituencies actively collaborate to nurture the child:

- Family of the child--the child's parent/s, siblings, and significant others
- School--the team of teachers, assistant teachers, related service providers, and administrators who interact directly with the child
- Network of school families--the aggregate of all the families enrolled in a particular class, program, or project

The FIT model uses a triangular diagram to illustrate the linkages between the family, school, and network of school families. The triangular scheme is depicted in Figure 1. By placing one constituency on each side of the triangle, three distinct, collaborative dyads emerge at the apexes A, B, and C.

Apex A: Family-School Collaboration

Apex B: School-Network of School Families Collaboration

Apex C: Network of School Families-Family Collaboration

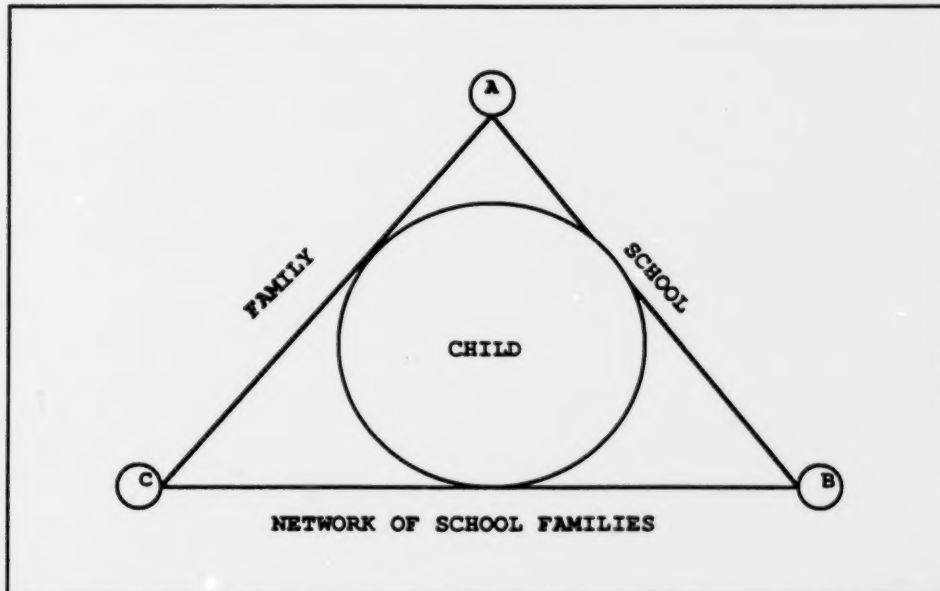


Figure 1. The Family Involvement Triangle

To maintain the focus of the FIT model, the child is placed in the center of the triangle, where he/she touches each of the sides. This touching symbolizes the interaction between each constituency and the child. The child and his/her unique qualities and abilities affect the content of all the FIT dyadic collaborations.

Different conversations and plans of action are inherent in each dyad. The family-school collaboration focuses primarily on goals and accomplishments for a particular child. The school-network of school families collaboration focuses on ways parents wish to contribute to the school and how those desires can be accomplished through home-school projects, events, and activities. The network of school families-family collaboration, an out-of-school networking system, focuses on activities like playgroups or after-school care.

The FIT model emphasizes the importance of support for families from both the school and the network of school families. The triangular model provides a means of concentrating on the varied relationships available to families in the school setting and supports the balance between the more formal family-school dyad and the informal network of school families-family dyad.

Before discussing the collaborative possibilities of each dyad, it is important to look at how collaboration occurs--that is, how collaboration starts, how it works, and how it is maintained.

HOW COLLABORATION OCCURS

A CONSUMER ORIENTED APPROACH TO FAMILY INVOLVEMENT

Identifying effective strategies for listening and responding to families is essential when creating a family-focused, family-directed collaboration model. Project APIP looked to the business world for guidance when developing a responsive, yet effective, service-oriented system. In the business world, survival relies in part on the ability to understand, work with, serve, and support the customer. So too must educators learn that the family, namely the parent and student, needs to be well served in order for the school-home partnership to survive as an effective entity.

Peters and Austin in their best-seller, A Passion for Excellence (1985), discuss the basic ingredients of a consumer-oriented approach to business management. They present three key concepts for getting customers involved with and committed to a product: (1) common courtesy for the customer, (2) listening to the customer, and (3) acting on what you hear. These concepts can easily be translated into strategies that educational institutions use to promote effective school-home collaboration.

What is a Customer?

A Customer is the most important person ever in this office...in person or by mail.
A Customer is not dependent on us...we are dependent on him.
A Customer is not an interruption of our work...he is the purpose of it....
A Customer is not someone to argue with. Nobody ever won an argument with a Customer.
A Customer is a person who brings us his wants....

(A poster that is prominently displayed
all around L.L. Bean, in Freeport, Maine)

Peters, T. and Austin, N. 1985

The first key concept, "common courtesy for the customer," is a simple idea, yet many times common courtesy is missing in the educational system. Peters coins the phrase "thinly disguised contempt" (p.42) as the antithesis of respect and courtesy for the customer. Thinly disguised contempt can appear in faculty lunchroom conversations as teachers complain about families that never send their children to school ready to learn. The "poor children" haven't had enough sleep, haven't eaten a good breakfast, haven't been reminded to do their homework, or haven't brought adequate supplies to school. The reasons for these problems are clear to the faculty--either the parents don't care enough or they don't feel school is valuable. Negative

conversations about families generated by staff members may potentially undermine the acceptance of or respect for the family in the larger school setting.

An alternative to this thinly, or not so thinly, disguised contempt is to "support people as heroes" (p.48). In education this is often paraphrased as "catching [the families] being good." Strategies, such as acknowledging, noticing, celebrating, requesting, and responding, develop relationships that encourage and empower families. Recognition for involvement and for parenting efforts keeps parents energized and productive both at home and at school.

A second key concept in a consumer oriented approach is "listening to the customer." The art of effective listening is instrumental in building a relationship. Too often, professionals are busy evaluating and judging what the parent is saying; or they are speeding ahead, thinking of a solution rather than listening to the thoughts, perceptions, and feedback being expressed. McGonigel and Garland (1988) invite early interventionists to consider ways to become a part of the family team, to move in harmony with family desires, and to empower families as competent decision makers. This invitation suggests listening to families in a way that helps them draw upon their own resources to promote the growth and well-being of their family.

"Acting on what you hear" is the third concept in a consumer oriented approach. In education, setting goals often makes this concept workable. Johnson, McGonigel, and Kaufmann propose goal setting take the form of "backward mapping from the street level upward" (p.9). This "backwards mapping" suggests that family needs and aspirations be the driving force for creating collaborative action plans. After the family has expressed their desires, the school and family can work together to establish collaborative goals and identify resources needed for goal attainment.

Once collaborative action plans are established, developing ways to communicate and interact that support the plans and the players becomes key. Keeping a goal or commitment alive and energized is indeed a challenging task. Monitoring progress, acknowledging breakdowns, and celebrating incremental successes are all part of helping individuals transform a vision into an accomplishment.

It is important to note that impeccable action plans do not guarantee customer satisfaction. Over the years, business research has found that quality of service is key to customer satisfaction (Peters and Austin 1985). Quality of service speaks to the care, commitment, and dependability of the professional. It is the serviceman who shows up within 24 hours when the washing machine breaks down. It is the early interventionist who is ready and willing to assist when needed by a family. Customers who have experienced quality service develop loyalty and commitment to the product and the organization. The success of a family involvement program depends on the quality of service delivery.

In summary, business seems to say that respecting and listening to the customer are the first steps in developing a relationship with the customer. This is followed by the development of a collaborative action plan, based on the resources and needs of the customer. Finally, communication with the customer must be maintained to guarantee satisfaction and continued collaboration toward goal attainment. All of these steps are embedded in a larger commitment of the organization to provide quality service to the customer.

STAGES OF COLLABORATION

From this background of consumer-oriented literature, FIT has identified three stages that are instrumental in building effective school-home collaborations. These stages are the foundation upon which staff and families in the FIT model generate meaningful action and accomplishments.

Stage I : Building a Relationship

Building a relationship creates the foundation for extraordinary outcomes. Too often, programs are planned and action taken before people listen and talk to each other about themselves and their aspirations. Careful listening, opportunities for informal get-togethers, and multiple invitations to join in classroom activities are examples of events that help create a collaborative dialogue between the school and families.

Stage II: Collaborative Goal Setting

Collaborative goal setting in FIT invites parents to decide how they want to participate in the school. How do they want to influence their child's education; how would they like to work with other parents in the school; and how might they network with each other after school? Collaborative goal setting allows parents to have an impact on their child, the school, and each other in an individualized, personalized way.

Stage III: Maintaining Communication

Setting goals does not guarantee accomplishment. Providing a structure for moving from vision to accomplishment is a key element to Stage III. During this stage, the staff devises methods to support family goals in an ongoing manner by working with parents as coworkers, resources, and coaches. In these roles the staff systematically communicates with parents, helping them to rethink or resolve problems and acknowledging their accomplishments and contributions. The consistency and predictability of maintaining the communication system deepens the sense of trust and respect between home and school.

These three stages--relationship building, collaborative goal setting, and maintaining communication represent a process of relating to and supporting all the collaborations occurring in FIT. They are most often hierarchical in nature. This hierarchical format suggests the need to build relationships that can support collaborative goal setting, followed by the need to structure a communication system to support the accomplishment of the goal.

The remaining three sections will focus on the intent and mechanics of creating and maintaining collaborative relationships in the three FIT collaborative dyads: family-school, school-network of school families and network of school families-family. The discussion will be illustrated with activities and projects generated in the APiP Integrated Preschool Program. These only serve as an example to the reader. They should not be treated like a menu of necessary activities. The only necessary ingredient is the process for building and maintaining collaborations between families and the school.

THE FAMILY-SCHOOL COLLABORATION

Developing a partnership between the family of the preschool child and the school is the major focus of the family-school collaboration. Point A of the family involvement triangle represents this partnership. The purpose of this partnership is to create a school-home team approach that enables parents to (1) identify and realize goals related to the preschool child, (2) view themselves as competent and important contributors to their child's development, and (3) experience the importance of their ongoing involvement in their child's schooling.

Education literature (McDonnell and Hardman 1988; NASBE 1988; Schweinhart 1988) suggests that family-school partnerships are enhanced when the following elements are present:

- parents are full partners in the educational planning and decision making;
- substantial face-to-face communication occurs at least once a month;
- observation and volunteer opportunities exist;
- systematic collaboration exists for the transfer of learning into the daily family routine.

The following sections discuss how to build and maintain collaborations that promote effective family-school collaborations.

Building a Relationship

For many parents, preschool or day care represents the first entry into a community-based child care system. In this first experience parents are full of aspirations for and concerns about their child. For parents of children with disabilities, this entrance is even more intensified due to the many concerns and emotions associated with their child's developmental delays.

Building a relationship between the staff and families begins as parents carefully select the most appropriate placement for their child. The role of the staff is to help with the selection process by serving as a resource. Prior to enrollment, families should be offered opportunities to learn about the school, its philosophy, curriculum, facilities, policies and staff. Events such as open houses, evening information meetings, site visits, and phone conversations supply families with the background necessary to make an optimal enrollment decision.

The staff as a resource is especially important for parents of children with disabilities. Public Law 99-457 clearly articulates the role of families as primary

decision makers in the selection of an appropriate placement for their child with disabilities. The staff promote informed decision making by focusing the parents on the child's identified needs, family needs, and services provided in various settings.

Once parents have chosen the preschool, a personalized orientation to the school encourages the new relationship. A staff member, most often the child's teacher, becomes the family's case manager and the family becomes the case manager's customer. The case manager welcomes families and cares for them as they become acquainted with the policies, personnel, and facilities of the school. As customers, families are encouraged to express their concerns about and aspirations for their preschool child which ultimately dictates the responsibilities of the case manager throughout the relationship. Flexibility and adaptability are key when working with families from diverse cultural, economic, and educational backgrounds. A case manager, who is adept at listening and committed to an active, interactive home-school partnership serves as a key ingredient to a successful family-school collaboration.

In Project APIP, the personalized orientation process focuses on helping families register in the school, become comfortable with the school and meet other families. One of the early jobs of the case manager is to help families with registration. Health status reports, immunization, birth certificates, and residency verification are but a few of the needed registration documents. Difficulties in accessing or completing these documents arise if the families are non-English-speaking, highly transient, or experience complications in completing the medical requirements. For families of children with special needs, Individual Education Plans (IEP) must be completed prior to school entry. The assistance of a committed case manager is required in many instances to successfully conclude this first stage.

When registration is complete, the personalized orientation process continues with a home visit by the case manager. If the family requests the visit occur out of the home, the initial visit is scheduled wherever the family prefers. The school or local parks have been used as alternatives to the home. This visit focuses on developing the relationship between the teacher, child, and family. In APIP the case manager shares general information about school policies and procedures, specific information about the first day of school and presents the child with a special book bag to carry to and from school. Throughout this visit, school is depicted as a safe, secure, and welcoming environment for the child and family.

As the first day of school arrives, anxieties are often high. The transition from home to school is eased in APIP by inviting the whole family to attend a shortened first day. Parents and siblings are encouraged to ride the bus with their preschooler. The room and activities are open for all to enjoy, allowing parents to get to know the room, the children, and other families. The open house invitation on the first day has alleviated many tears and fears of parents and children alike as

families embark on this new preschool experience.

Through the home visit and the first-day open house, parents and children begin to develop a sense of trust in the staff and the school. During the first months of school, frequent informal occasions are planned so that parents and families can interact with the staff, children, and each other. The intermingling of families and staff on walking field trips, picnics in the park, an evening dessert, or a class video-and-popcorn party, allows families to become comfortable and familiar with school. Building this relationship is a necessary ingredient for the open, honest communication encouraged in the next stage: collaborative goal setting.

Collaborative Goal Setting

Collaborative goal setting is the stage where the staff works together with parents to identify and prioritize educational goals for the preschool child. Because of the integrated nature of APIP, the timelines for school-home collaborative goal setting vary. For children with disabilities, collaborative goal setting occurs in conjunction with enrollment. As part of the eligibility process for special education, the IEP team, including the child's parents, outlines broad goals reflecting the child's areas of weakness. Prior to the child's first day of school in the APIP program, the case manager and the parents further specify the IEP objectives for the child. Since the professionals are unfamiliar with the child and family and vice versa, the APIP staff question this early establishment of goals. The APIP staff prefers the timeline used for the parents of normally developing children, which allows a two-to-three month diagnostic and relationship-building period for staff, child, and family. At the end of this period, staff and parents seem better prepared to talk about child goals in a meaningful way. This readiness is based on a gathering of mutual information and a growing sense of trust. With the knowledge that broad IEP goals are determined immediately following the eligibility process, the APIP staff feels that the specific educational objectives can be written in a more meaningful, collaborative way with the parents of disabled children after a two-three month diagnostic, relationship-building period.

The FIT model uses a focused parent interview to facilitate collaborative goal setting (See appendix A). The focused parent interview is based on the belief that parental concerns and aspirations for the preschool child must be heard first when establishing educational goals for the child. In FIT, issues identified by the parents become a central focus of the child's early education program. Bailey and Simeonsson (1988) propose that parent involvement in goal setting is enhanced when the following guidelines are put into effect:

- time and care is spent in listening to the parent;
- the parent agrees with the recommendations;

- the parent believes he/she has skills to follow up on the recommendation;
- the parent believes recommendations are feasible.

The focused parent interview is in philosophical alignment with Guidelines and Recommended Practices for the IFSP (Johnson, McGonigel and Kaufmann 1989) which states, "Part H of Public Law 99-457 absolutely does not require family assessment...rather, it directs gathering information about families' strengths and needs related to their ability to enhance their children's development" (p.32). The focused parent interview does not examine "what's wrong" with the child and identify skills for remediation. Rather it explores "what's next" for the child and promotes the collaborative design of a school-home program that facilitates child growth and development.

The focused parent interview has three primary stages in the interchange between parents and case manager/teacher.

1. Teacher's Reflection on the Child

The teacher begins the interview with a narrative about the child as a participant in the preschool. The conversation is descriptive in nature and focuses on the child's development, work, and activity in the room. APIP uses video recordings, snap shots, child products, and anecdotal records to describe the child's school behaviors. It is important to provide positive yet informative data to parents.

2. Parents' Reflection on the Child

The teacher leads an open-ended inquiry into the parents' view of the child's life at home--for example, the child's interests, typical day, likes and dislikes, and areas of need. The teacher is listening for parental aspirations for the child.

3. Collaborative Goal Setting

After paraphrasing the parents' comments for further reflection and clarification, the teacher asks parents to identify goals for the child. Questions used to elicit parental goals might be:

- what would you like to see your child learn this year?
- what do you feel is important for your child to learn next? How can we work on that together?

When goals have been identified, parents are asked how they would know when the goals have been accomplished. Based on the answer, observable, measurable goals are developed. Copies of the goals are distributed to families and

staff. A concrete plan for follow-up is established during the conference.

Collaborative goal setting is an ongoing process. The focused parent interview is used in modified forms throughout the child's preschool years. Formal parent conferences are held twice a year with informal conversations about the child's progress occurring spontaneously throughout the year.

Maintaining Communication

The third stage of the family-school collaboration establishes methods for maintaining communication. Keeping goals and aspirations alive is a challenging task. To keep attention and energy focused on identified goals as well as to monitor child progress, parents and staff need to plan how they will keep in touch. They may use traditional methods like notebooks and phone calls, or novel ideas like video conversations, portfolio collections, or shared home/school evaluation systems.

There are several important issues to consider when designing a system for maintaining communication between home and school. First, monitoring strategies need to pinpoint incremental accomplishments that lead to larger goal attainment. Task analysis, goal attainment scaling (Bailey and Simeonsson 1988), and behavior modification systems are all methods to measure changes in child functioning over time. Great expectations are accomplished in small steps. It is imperative that ongoing communication both recalls the larger vision and celebrates the small gains.

Second, children need opportunities to practice their new skills, both at home and in community settings. Communication systems should keep parents informed about progress in skill acquisition at school and provide them with ways to reinforce these skills in their home environment.

Third, when establishing a communication system, both staff and parents must determine a viable system in terms of time and effort. Nothing is more defeating than creating a support system with which participants cannot comply. In the first year of APIP, individual notebooks went back and forth between home and school on a daily basis carrying important news from teacher to parent and often from parent to teacher. The low staff/child ratio made this communication system feasible. In the second year of APIP, the program grew in size with each teacher responsible for more children. The notebook communication system continued, but teachers rarely had time in the course of the day to unpack and read the notebooks, let alone write notes in them. It soon became obvious that this method of communication was no longer viable. Weekly newsletters, supplemented with frequent phone conversations, proved much more reasonable for the APIP staff in terms of time and efficiency.

Finally, requesting help and resources from families can be an extremely important aspect in maintaining communication. Partnerships encompass the act of

both giving and receiving. If families see themselves as mere recipients of help and services, they often experience feelings of dependence, uselessness, and obligation. When staff identify program needs and request help from parents, they encourage a reciprocal relationship that validates the partnership. Through staff requests, parents become active participants in the daily preschool program, special projects, and family events. Ongoing family involvement provides opportunities for staff to express appreciation to parents for their contributions to the program and the children.

In summary, the family-school collaboration focuses on the development of a partnership between individual families and the school staff. The intent of the partnership is to develop a collaborative relationship between home and school that increases parental interest and participation in the child's schooling. Time and attention is given to early relationship building through information sharing and a personalized orientation to the staff and school. The focused parent interview establishes collaborative goals. Finally, a method for maintaining communication is developed that both supports the accomplishment of the identified goals and maintains a strong family-school relationship.

SCHOOL - NETWORK OF SCHOOL FAMILIES COLLABORATION

The school-network of school families collaboration, point B on the FIT diagram, focuses on developing linkages between families within the context of school. Family networking is fostered by engaging parents, siblings, and staff in meaningful activities, events, and projects in the preschool.

In the FIT model, networking is important for two reasons. First, parents provide support systems for each other in times of need, crisis, or doubt. Social support theory suggests that the availability of supportive persons or networks can be crucial for enabling individuals confronted with stressful life events to remain healthy and intact (Intagliata and Doyle 1984; Dunst, Trivette and Deal 1988). For parents, these crucial supportive persons are often other parents. In a school setting, parents can readily find other parents who share child rearing joys and concerns. Two families always seem able to commiserate about the unforgivable behaviors of their three-year-olds, thereby turning feelings of inadequacy into humorous anecdotes about "Sam" or "Martha." The parents of children with disabilities may harbor more intense worries. They worry about the prognosis of their child and whether their child will ever lead a normal life. They wonder if they have found the best program for their child. These worries are in addition to the typical bedwetting and "No! No! No!" concerns. A sympathetic ear, some reassurance, and perhaps advice from an understanding friend can be comforting in times of confusion and doubt.

Second, family involvement in school projects and events can promote a sense of belonging and acceptance among all the preschool families. This is especially important in a preschool such as APIP, where a wide range of cultural backgrounds, economic stability, and educational needs exists. A sense of camaraderie and belonging among all families serves to raise the self-esteem of those living on the periphery, or segregated from the mainstream of the community.

Consider, for a moment, families of children with disabilities. Parents of young children with disabilities report feeling isolated from normal community life when the only activities in which their child participates are located in segregated, special education settings (Johnson, McGonigal, and Kaufmann 1989). They also frequently express a desire to have their child develop friendships with same-aged typical children (Strain 1990). The school-network of school families collaboration is designed to foster the networking of all families within a specific classroom. If the classroom represents an integration of typical and atypical children from diverse cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds, so too should parent networking promote the inclusion of all families in a larger preschool "family".

The FIT model creates an environment where (1) parents can form supportive relationships with each other in the preschool, (2) families can experience an universal sense of belonging and acceptance, and (3) families are used as resources to the

school. The following discussion focuses on how the staff facilitates opportunities for parent to parent networking within the context of school.

Building a Relationship

Enroll twelve children in a program, send them to school every day and all the parents will automatically begin networking. FALSE. Experience tells us that building family relationships in a classroom requires planned intervention efforts. The FIT model has identified several factors that appear important in the early stages of relationship building among parents.

1. Staff initiates networking in the early stages.

In many cases the program staff plays the major role in creating situations where parents can get together. In the first few months, APIP created several opportunities to bring the entire parent body together. These included the first-day-of-school open house, an evening dessert for entire families, and several daytime school events such as lunch at the park, morning coffees, and a field trip.

2. Children are involved in all the early events.

Early events rely heavily on children as the drawing card for getting parents to school. The majority of early APIP events had the preschoolers present, and in some cases the preschoolers planned and organized the event for the families. The eagerness and enthusiasm brought home by the preschooler about the upcoming event encouraged more than one family to participate.

3. Friendships among children promote friendships among parents.

A parent's knowledge of emerging friendships among the children contributes to parents getting to know one another. In APIP, the staff continually keeps parents aware, by phone or with notes, of friendships developing in the classroom and encourages them to talk with each other regarding after-school play opportunities. Other ways APIP has informed parents of emerging friendships include:

- photos of children playing together appear in the newsletter and are displayed in the classroom
- children work on projects together and bring them home to share
- "yearbooks" are distributed with all the children's pictures
- videos of children working and playing together are shown at parent events and parent-teacher conferences.

4. Parent volunteers are scheduled in pairs.

Whenever possible, parent volunteers are scheduled in pairs to promote networking. Parents working on a gardening, cooking, or art project often need each other's help and laughter to see the project to its conclusion.

5. Most events are informal.

An informal, social atmosphere at family events allows parents to get to know one another. The staff see that families are introduced to one another, and wear name tags for easy identification. The staff also provides opportunities for families with limited English to be understood in their native tongue.

In APIP, as the familiarity and networking among families increased, parents became more interested in initiating some activities and projects themselves. This increased comfort and willingness to make suggestions for program activities signalled the beginning of the second stage of the school-network of school families collaboration: collaborative goal setting.

Collaborative Goal Setting

Collaborative goal setting represents the transition from staff-initiated to parent-initiated projects, activities, and events. Parent-initiated projects reflect the family-directed, consumer-oriented approach of the FIT model. They result from parents expressing an interest in having more input in special projects and events for the preschool. After several months, the APIP staff received more offers from parents to organize or sponsor events. Offers were often expressed through questions:

- "Do you need a room mother?"
- "Can I help plant a garden?"
- "Is there a Halloween party planned?"

Staff acted on these offers, looking for ways to incorporate suggestions from parents into the preschool program and, at the same time, recruited other parents to help with the projects. This early parent-initiated phase was informal and spontaneous.

The formation of an APIP Parent Advisory Committee (PAC) set the stage for more formal parent-initiated goal setting in the school-network of school families collaboration. The PAC, consisting of parents and staff, was the conduit for designing and implementing family-directed, consumer-oriented projects. Meetings were open to all parents and did not require consistent attendance. Parents and staff worked as a team on the PAC: parents led the meetings, while staff served as a resource to parent initiatives.

The PAC addressed the following issues:

1. How do families want to be involved in the preschool?
2. What projects are of interest to the families?
3. What are the priorities for projects this year?
4. Who will oversee each project?

Given the parent-initiated nature of the PAC, the organization and agenda of the group can vary tremendously from year to year. In APIP the PAC was created in the second year of the project, after spending the first year in the relationship-building phase of the school-network of school families collaboration. Parents decided to appoint a chairperson and hold monthly meetings at school, rotating between day and evening meetings. A consistent group of five parents out of twenty-one attended the meetings, with two or three additional parents joining occasionally. They established a full agenda of parent-initiated projects including three fund-raisers, support groups, a toy-lending library, an evening book-reading series, two Saturday preschool-cleaning days, holiday parties, a year-end picnic, and an evening puppet show, written and dramatized by the parents. None of these ideas were suggested by staff. Different individuals headed each project and solicited the support of all the preschool families through phone calls and newsletter announcements.

Year III of APIP saw a very different PAC approach. The parent body was much smaller (twelve), and many parents were working or at home with new babies. Parents preferred to meet in more informal ways, such as on field trips or at class luncheons. At those events they would discuss special project ideas among themselves and with the staff. The question of organized monthly meetings or PAC leadership never surfaced. A Halloween party, a yard sale fund-raiser, and a spaghetti supper for all the families were the major events of Year III. Thus, the PAC organization and goal setting in Year II and Year III were very different, yet both reflected the needs and desires of the existing parent body.

Maintaining Communication

The staff is central to the communication maintenance aspect of the school-network of school families collaboration. Once projects have been determined, the staff often helps parents organize the pieces, delegate the responsibilities, and serve as a clearinghouse for progress reports. The staff needs to be sensitive to the unavoidable stresses that occur in project work and ready to help resolve problems. In many respects the staff finds itself in the position of coach standing outside the action, supporting the players in accomplishing their goals.

Another important staff function is the acknowledgment of families for their ongoing contributions to the school. Personal notes from the staff, a newsletter

thank-you, phone calls, and public acknowledgments at school events allow families to experience the difference they can make in their children's schooling. Communication maintenance strategies in this dyad offer staff many opportunities to follow the advice of Peters and Austin (1985) by "support[ing] people as heroes."

In summary, the function of the school-network of school families collaboration is to foster networking between families within the school thereby enriching the preschool experience for the children and families. Parents, through the parent advisory committee, initiate and direct projects that are meaningful to the parent body. Staff members serve as resources and coworkers, functioning primarily as coaches, consultants, and cheerleaders to the parents. This collaboration is designed to promote group spirit and group identity among the parent body.

The school-network of school families collaboration also provides training for the future involvement of parents in the schools. Through positive interaction with other parents and staff in a preschool, it is anticipated that parents will remain actively involved in their child's education during the elementary years.

NETWORK OF SCHOOL FAMILIES-FAMILY COLLABORATION

In the FIT model, the network of school families-family collaboration represents the networking of parents outside the purview of the school--the "extracurricular" collaborations of the preschool parents. Parents network outside the school for many reasons, such as transportation needs, baby-sitting, playgroups, friendships between children, common interests, and adult companionship. This section will discuss ways in which staff encourages these extracurricular matches, and the potential benefits to families from the network of school families-family collaboration.

Building a Relationship

Although the network of school families-family collaboration is not the responsibility of the school staff, many times relationship building among the families begins at the preschool and is facilitated by the staff. Linkages between parents often evolve from knowledge of common interests, needs, or resources within the parent body. In APIP, the teachers were often the first to hear about the wishes of parents. They were then able to play "matchmaker" and casually suggest another parent who might be a resource or companion, depending on the specific wish. In this "matchmaker" role, the teacher served as a prompter or indirect organizer of parent-to-parent networking. The teacher acted like a telephone operator. Each individual placed a call, and the teacher connected the line.

Parents themselves discover other parents who share similar concerns and interests or whose children are especially friendly at school. For parents to link together independently, they must be able to contact one another. APIP addressed this need by distributing to each family a class roster that included child and parent names, phone numbers, and addresses. Each family gave permission to release this personal data prior to distribution of the roster.

Collaborative Goal Setting

Initiative on the part of the families drives the collaborative goal setting in the network of school families-family collaboration. If two families or two parents have decided to get together outside of the school, it is obvious they have instigated the cooperative arrangement. This networking of families appears to arise most often out of a stated or perceived need of the preschool child or the child's parent. The following are illustrations of thoughts or comments drawn from APIP parents and children that instigated collaborations among families:

1. *"I want to have Sean over to my house."*
The stated need of this child initiated a friendship between two families.

2. *"My child needs friends around over the summer in order to maintain the progress he made this year in school."*
The need of a child, perceived by a mom, led to the design of a summer playgroup in which many families coordinated logistics such as supervision, transportation, and meeting places.
3. *"I'd better talk to someone about this behavior quickly before he drives me crazy."*
Needs of parents led to the development of personal friendships and a support group that met informally in homes without staff guidance.

Maintaining Communication

While families getting to know and enjoy each other outside of school might be a notable outcome for a family involvement model, the FIT model does not propose that "extracurricular" collaborations are essential to the model's success. Yet the inclusion of the network of school families-family collaboration in the FIT model highlights the possibilities for support and friendships created through informal networking between families. This connectedness has the potential to promote (1) a family's sense of trust and belonging to a community or neighborhood, (2) a more normalized community involvement for families of children with disabilities, (3) a greater choice of homes where children can play, and (4) the creation of neighborhood "families" in a situation where nuclear families are fragmented by discord or distance. Nurtured by the network of school families-family collaboration, "extracurricular" linkages between preschool families may lead to friendships in those early years that continue long after preschool has ended.

SUMMARY

The Family Involvement Triangle is a family-focused, family-directed, school-home partnership. Theory and practices in early childhood education, early intervention, and business were incorporated into its design. The major goals of the FIT model are (1) to promote parent participation in the schooling of their child, (2) to support parents in accomplishing their goals for their preschool child, and (3) to offer opportunities for parent-to-parent networking.

The FIT model focuses on developing collaborations between staff and individual families, families within the context of the school community, and families as friends outside of school. The staff nurtures these collaborations through strategies that promote relationship building, establish collaborative goals, and support communication maintenance. FIT attends to the building of both formal and informal support systems that enable parents to experience a sense of competence and involvement in the education of their preschool child.

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7

APPENDIX A
FOCUSED PARENT INTERVIEW

FOCUSED PARENT INTERVIEW

The goal of the focused parent interview is to create a conversation between staff and parents that enhances school-home collaboration.

This interview provides an opportunity for parents to identify and express their goals for their preschool child and to focus on a plan for realizing those goals through a school-home partnership. The role of the interviewer/teacher is to listen for parents' wishes about their preschooler and help parents translate those wishes into goals. The concerns and problems parents express about their child help identify potential collaborative projects.

The focused parent interview has five steps. Each step is roughly outlined below. The interviewer is responsible for maintaining a level of comfort that enhances communication with the parent. The interview structure can be modified at any time to facilitate the ongoing conversation.

STEP 1: STRUCTURING THE INTERVIEW

This is an agenda-setting step to inform the parents of the basic format of the conference and the time frame.

Teacher Script

Today we are going to do three things.

First I will update you on your child's work in the classroom using

Then I would like to hear from you about _____ as a family member; how s/he enjoys her/his time; what you enjoy most about _____; how s/he adjusts and adapts to family routines, etc.

Finally, I would like us to take a few minutes to focus on what you hope _____ will accomplish here. If you had three wishes about what _____ would learn or grow to be this year, what would they be? Another way to look at it might be, what changes would you like to see for _____ as s/he grows and changes at home and school this year. By looking at your goals for _____, it will enable us to design together a plan of action that supports _____'s growth and development both at home and school.

I expect this conference will take about 30 minutes.

This segment should end with a statement reassuring the parents that anything discussed will be confidential and used only for staff program-planning purposes.

STEP 2: TEACHER'S REFLECTION ON THE CHILD

A. Teacher shares with parents the school's philosophy about early childhood education and their commitment to the child's growth and development.

Example: *Project APIP staff is committed to creating an environment where your child*

- *experiences being a competent, capable, responsible individual;*
- *is challenged to try new things and make new friends;*
- *is supported in his/her risk-taking efforts.*

Our program provides your child with the structure necessary to feel secure and comfortable. The staff is skilled at listening to and observing children. We adjust and adapt the ongoing program based on your child's interests and needs. We value the unique qualities of each child in our program and strive to share and acknowledge his/her interests and abilities.

B. Teacher shares information gathered on the child over the past two to three months. This conversation is descriptive in nature and focuses on the child's development, work, and activities in the room. Video recordings, child products, and anecdotal records are all used to describe the child's school behaviors. Parents are given positive, yet informative data about their child.

STEP 3: PARENT'S REFLECTION ON THE CHILD

This step begins with a broad, open-ended question, followed by questions asking for clarification or elaboration. Below is a possible script for this step.

Teacher Script

Restate the purpose of this step.

Now I'd like to learn some things about _____ from you. Knowing more about _____ outside of school will help us design a program that gives _____ new skills to use at home and will also allow him/her to show off his/her strengths, talents, and interests in school.

Broad, open-ended question.

With this purpose in mind, can you tell me a little about _____ at home?

Follow up by asking for clarifications or elaborations.

Clarification:

You were mentioning [such and such]. Tell me a little more about _____ in that situation.

Common areas to explore further:

- strengths
- frustration/coping skills
- health
- child rearing practices
- social relationships
- role in family
- rules of family
- siblings
- critical times in life of family
 - death
 - job/money-related issues
 - transitions
 - illness
 - marital issues
 - pregnancy

Elaboration:

When you think back, what were some of the most fun/successful times you had with _____?

Sounds like you have had some frustrating experiences with _____. Would you tell me about some of them?

STEP 4: COLLABORATIVE GOAL SETTING

Teacher restates some of the strengths, weaknesses and issues that surfaced in Step 3 and asks parents if that accurately reflects what they said.

Teacher asks the parents about what they might like their preschooler to accomplish during the year.

Questions used to elicit parental goals might be:

- *what would you like to see your child learn this year?*
- *what do you feel is important for your child to learn next? How can we work on that together?*

If they have already stated some problems or issues of concern, the teacher can help translate them into projects or goals. Goals should be stated in observable, measurable terms, written down, and copies given to the family. Select one or two goals as a beginning point. The remainder can be prioritized and addressed at a later date. Parents leave the interview with an action plan and a system for keeping in touch.

STEP 5: ACKNOWLEDGMENT OF THE ROLE OF PARENTING

Conclude the interview by providing the parents with a supportive statement or story about their work as parents and how their involvement in their child's schooling has and will continue to make a difference to their child.